

Hearings Strengthen Watergate Senators

By CHRISTOPHER LYDON

The Watergate hearings that have made Senator Sam J. Ervin Jr., a national folk figure have strengthened each of the six other Watergate Senators in their home states.

Referring impatiently to the Watergate hearings, President Nixon deplored a "backward-looking obsession with Watergate" in his televised address Wednesday night. He declared that "the time has come to turn Watergate over to the courts."

According to a series of interviews, the judgment of political experts in the home states of the Watergate committee members is that television stardom in inquisitors' roles has so far been an almost unmixed blessing.

The seven committee members, four Democrats and three Republicans voted unanimously last month to take their demand for Presidential tape recordings and other White House records to court; they will resume the hearings next month on the Nixon campaign's "dirty tricks" in the 1972 election.

The three Democrats on the committee who face reelection next year are all regarded as overwhelming favorites to win. Senator Edward J. Gurney of Florida, the only Republican up next year, is not so sure a bet.

Mr. Gurney agreed with President Nixon's view—expressed in his televised address last week—that the Watergate committee's work is essentially over, a suggestion that he is primarily concerned about the Nixon loyalists in the Republican party back home.

Senator Ervin, the 76-year-old Democrat from North Carolina, has not indicated whether he will run again.

Senator Howard H. Baker Jr., the Tennessee Republican and vice chairman of the and vice chairman of the Watergate committee, faces an acute form of a typical hazard: Re-elected by a landslide in Tennessee last year, Senator Baker still ran six percentage points behind President Nixon's winning margin in his own state. Yet Senator Baker seems to have satisfied Nixon loyalists by putting less emphasis on Watergate recriminations than on future reforms.

S. J. Kopald, the G.O.P. chairman in Tennessee, calls Mr. Baker's role "good for the Republican party." James R. Sasser, his Democratic counterpart, observed, "I have heard people say [Senator Baker] was not as tough on the big boys as he was on the spear carriers," referring to Nixon Administration witnesses. "Some of those long moralistic questions did not go over with the people," Mr. Sasser said.

But the rival party chairmen both say Senator Baker would run stronger now than ever. They both hint that Senator Baker's prominence will outweigh President Nixon's embarrassment next year and improve the chance of collecting another Republican governor to succeed Winfield Dunn, the first Republican Governor of Tennessee in 50 years.

Gurney Appears Stronger

Six months ago Senator Gurney was thought to be vulnerable to challenge either in a Republican primary or a general election next year. But his open solicitude for Nixon Administration witnesses has apparently improved his stock among Florida Republicans.

Bill David, director of the Republican State Committee in Tallahassee, calls him a "calming influence" on the Watergate committee, and says the television exposure "can't hurt."

Esther Weissenborn, vice chairman of the Dade County Democratic organization in Miami, still regards Senator Gurney as an "inviting target."

"The Democrats see Senator Gurney as a person who vacillates," Mrs. Weissenborn said last week. "He ties his wagon to President Nixon's star, but when the star starts falling as it did around Watergate, he starts untying the knot."

Senator Lowell P. Weicker Jr., the Connecticut Repub-

lican who has not restrained his fury at the Nixon campaigners, has clearly irritated some Republicans but dazzled others and has apparently made up for conservative defectors with liberal and independent converts.

"I think you'll find that 80 per cent of Republicans feel Lowell Weicker has made a fool out of himself," said Gordon W. Reed of Greenwich. Mr. Reed is a New York financier and former Republican finance chairman in Connecticut.

But J. Brian Gaffney, the current Republican state chairman, says Senator Weicker "has also made a lot of friends."

John Alsop, the Republican national committeeman from Connecticut and brother of Joseph and Stewart Alsop, the columnists, says of Mr. Weicker, "I feel sure that most of the voters of Connecticut are impressed and full of admiration." Senator Weicker does not face reelection until 1976.

In Georgia, Republicans are toying with the novel notion of a serious challenge to Senator Herman E. Talmadge next year, but Democrats ridiculed the idea and neutral observers see Senator Talmadge at a peak of popularity.

Bob Shaw, chairman of the Republican party in Georgia, argues hopefully that "the national exposure has hurt Senator Talmadge in Georgia."

"People are finding his new image of puritanism amazing," Mr. Shaw said. "They know this is the same old Herman who used to get out and live it up with the boys, the same Herman who used to spit tobacco juice all over the walls of the Capitol. Now he's changing his image, or at least trying to," Mr. Shaw remarked.

Other Observers Differ

Reg Murphy, editor of The Atlanta Constitution, and other independent observers disagree. "The voice is sharp and penetrating," Mr. Murphy wrote in a recent column. "The questions are blunt and stright to the point. Talmadge probably was unthe-walls-of-the-capitol-Now beatable before hand but his handling of the Watergate probe thus far has strengthened him."

In Hawaii, Republicans are still smarting about Senator Daniel K. Inouye's remark, "What a liar," directed at a former White House aide, John D. Ehrlichman, and overheard by television microphones. But they never expected to beat Senator Inouye in next year's election campaign.

The Honolulu Star-Bulletin, like other commentators in Hawaii, has been enthusiastic. The newspaper's only criticism of Senator Inouye involved the day that he skipped a Watergate hearing to attend a fund-raising dinner at home to raise \$200,000 for his campaign.

"While it is an act of impiety these days to speak of Senator Inouye without either saluting or weeping," The Star-Bulletin editorialized, "someone might properly raise the question, 'What the hell is he going to do with the \$200,000?' He certainly will need for his reelection campaign no more than \$990.06, which is the price for two round-trip tickets to Washington, one to file his candidacy, the other to vote for himself along with the rest of the population of Hawaii."

Voters in New Mexico are aware of the jokes about Senator Joseph M. Montoya in the national press. Including the remark by Art Buchwald's the humorist, that the time for television watchers to use the bathroom is when Senator Montoya starts questioning witnesses. Others have noted that Senator Montoya is so absorbed in his questions that he never listens to the answers.

But the national jokes also feed a defensive pride in Senator Montoya, whose constituents know that his first language—still the language of his fieriest campaign speeches—was Spanish. Senator Montoya was re-elected to a six-year-term in 1970.